

II.

AN ORIGINAL LETTER TO THE LAIRD OF WISHAW (NOW PRESENTED TO THE MUSEUM), RELATING TO THE PROCEEDINGS AGAINST JAMES AIKENHEAD "THE ATHEIST," AND THE TRIAL OF WITCHES AT PAISLEY IN 1696. COMMUNICATED BY DAVID LAING, ESQ., FOREIGN SECRETARY, S. A. SCOT.

LETTER, *Rev. Robert Wyllie to the Laird of Wishaw.*

HAM : 16 June 1697.

DEAR SIR,—I return you my hearty thanks for yours to me of May 18, and for your kind remembrance of me & mine, in your letters to your Lady which I have sometymes the favour of seeing, & wherein you mention a third to me which I have not received. I have heard much of the censures past upon the Government here by some pious and charitable wits at London, & elsewhere, upon occasion of the sentence given against Aikenhead the Atheist; but when these gentlemen understood, if they are capable of thinking or understanding anything but a bold sparkish jest, that the ground of that wretches sentence was not, as I know some of them misrepresented it, a retracted error of the judgement but a perverse malicious railing against the adorable object of Christian worship which simply infers Death without the quality or aggravation of [obstinat continuance] tho' that also was in Aikenhead's case till after sentence, and this most expressly by the first clause of Act 21 Parl. i. ch. 2. And when these witty critiks consider that Reason, Commonsense, & good Manners (their own Trinity) do require that no man should in the face of a people spitefully revile and insult the object of their adoration, and that a Christian could not be innocent who should rail at or curse Mahomet at Constantinople, and consequently that their pleadings

¹ No. lxxiii. To an anonymous Prince.

against Aikenhead's condemnation were most unjust & founded upon mistake of the case and matter of fact.

One wold think that after all this they should be more sparing & cautious at such a distance, and under such uncertainty of report, in passing their little rash judgements upon the late proceedings of this Government with reference to the Witches in Renfrew. In spite of all the Atheism & Sadducism in the world, it is manifest beyond contradiction to the conviction of many hundreds of witnesses, and some of these not less inquisitive nor more credulous than these *Esprits forts* the sagacious and wise censurers themselves, that there hath bin, and is in those parts, a most horrid combination of Dively & Witchcraft, or which is the same thing, a continued tract of the operations of invisible malicious spirits in formal & explicit compact, w^t miserable deluded mortals. Now unles a man hath so far renounced humanity as well as Religion, as to deny invisible spirits and the being of witches and the Scripture law—Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live—I see not with what modesty or good manners, the proceedings of the Government in another nation can be judged and censured unles the whole grounds of these proceedings and matters of fact in all their circumstances were fully laid before the censurers. There is a well attested narrative of the troubles of Bargarren's child and of other Diabolical Molestations & Malefices, and of the processes of those who have bin condemned, preparing for the press. And tho' I am as much for caution & wariness as any in such dark & abstruse matters, where the vulgar is easily imprest by superstitious fears, and the Devil mingles fable to conceal or discredit truth, and somtymes industriously labours to impose trickes for the destruction of the Innocent ; yet I doubt not but these Accounts, when sent abroad into the world, will sufficiently convince such as have not resolved to harden themselves against all conviction.

I cannot in a letter, nor should I at all attempt, living at a distance from the place, and not having the papers and narratives at hand, to give you any relation of particulars which I have heard from most credible persons who were witnesses (for many things that pass in the country I do not regard), and which I have read in the Accounts & declarations that are in writting, least I might fail in some little circumstance to the prejudice of the whole. Neither can I tell you the particular grounds on which 7 of these wretches were tried and put to death at Paisley on Thurs-

day last, for I was not present at the tryal. But at the former meeting of the Court, I was witness to their proceeding, which was exceeding wary, and where the Insensible mark was found on these seven and many more. I see pins struck in to the head, in some of them throw the very shin bone, and in others throw the bones in the back, without bleeding or pain, for the persons did not know they were there till some space after that they were made pull them out themselves. And in some the marks were so hardened like horn, even in fleshy parts, that needles were broke in them, & pins bowed without piercing. Besides this and a long-continued *peissima Fama*, and the constant accusations of Bargarren's tormented child, who had seen all these persons tormenting her (at least in spectre), none of which I think were taken for more than presumption or grounds of suspicion. Besides all this, there is the testimony of three young persons, two boys & a girl, who were of the crew; the youngest 12 years of age, and further, of two women of the same crew, who are all yet alive. And after these, of a man called Reid, who voluntarily confest, but was found strangled in prison next day, as was probably supposed, by the Devil. All these confessions, given at severall tymes, are full, exactly agreeing in circumstances, persons, meetings & compacts w^t the Devil, malefices, &c. There were further brought before the court many presumptions against the pannels of their murdering men & children, & proofs of their charming, &c., by other honest people above suspicion. And after all the famous professing, or, as they called her, the presbyterian Witch, Margaret Lang (one whom I discoursed with in prison, & found her knowledge beyond the common rate of country women), did, the day before execution, confess she had bin in league with the Devil from eleven years of age, & had often renewed it, & she repeated her confession at the fire (though with little sign of true repentance), and confirmed what the other confessants had discovered, and accused all those who suffered with her, and who died exceeding stupid and confused.

If your sparks at London blame this Government of severity, there are some here no less apt to complain of their remissness, and it is certain some have been over shy, & tho' their station obliged them to concern themselves, yet have appeared too unwilling to medle at all in the matter. I shall not trouble you with what is maliciously insinuated of the charm-

ing influence that one Mary Morrison's gold hath had upon some, who is wife to a rich skipper in Greenock called Duncan, and who albeit she be branded for a Rampant Topping Witch by the concurring testimonies of all the confessants, & much evidence beside, yet after imprisonment was liberat on bail, & continues still at liberty.

What further measures the Government will take, we yet know not. There are many still in prison, & more delated, & last week Bargarreu's child had some returns of her unaccountable fits. And the whole matter & the scandal and molestation that is raised by it in the country doth certainly call for the most strict & judicious inquiry.

Tho' I am not willing to say much of this business till the whole comes to publick view, a hint in one of your letters to your Lady hath drawn this from me. I saw your family well yesterday. I hope your Sons shall profit by their new governour. I give my most humble duty & sincerely affectionat good wishes to E. A. and long exceedingly to hear what you and he knows we long have longed for, & pray may be accompanied with all happiness & honour. My wife most kindly salutes you. I am

unfeignedly yours,

R. WYLLIE.

Postscript.

SIR,—If you have occasion to see Mr Anthony Murray, brother to Tippermoor, allow me to give you the trouble of telling him (with my humble service & kind respects to him), that I have received the watch he sent me, which Mrs Muirhead hath paid for, and that I expect to hear from him an account of these books which I wrote for, & which shall be carefully paid for after the same manner.

Indorsed, TO THE LAIRD OF WISHAW.

The writer of the above letter was Mr Robert Wyllie, minister of the parish of Hamilton, a man, says Wodrow, "of shining piety, fine taste, excellent sense, and singular accomplishments in every branch of valuable knowledge and learning." He died in February 1715, aged about 57. It is addressed to William Hamilton, Laird of Wishaw, a learned antiquary, and author of "The Description of the Sherifdoms of Lanark and Renfrew;" and refers to two unfortunate casés involving the trial and execu-

tion for criminal offences, that excited, both at the time and since, considerable notoriety—the one being that of a young man for Blasphemy; the other of five females for Witchcraft, in the year 1696.

The original letter was brought to me by Mr SLIGHT, who could not decipher the signature, and as he proposed to present it to the Society, I offered to accompany it with a brief preliminary notice to explain its allusions. Both cases, however, have acquired so much notoriety, and as neither of them are subjects agreeable to dwell upon, I cannot, I think, do better than refer to the “*Domestic Annals of Scotland*,” by our old friend and associate, Dr Robert Chambers, vol. iii. p. 160–166, published in 1861. He has treated both cases at considerable length, and in a judicious manner. I will content myself, therefore, in merely adding with this reference a brief notice of the chief works in which the first case had previously been discussed.

I. THOMAS AIKENHEAD.

Thomas Aikenhead, a youth of 18, “son to the deceest James Aikenhead, chirurgon in Edinburgh,” had been accustomed to retail the sentiments of certain atheistical writers against the truths of the Bible; and in the words of Lord Macaulay “with the conceit from which half-educated lads of quick parts are seldom free, proclaimed his discoveries to four or five of his companions.” Having been apprehended and imprisoned, he was, by a special Act of Privy Council, remitted to the High Court of Justiciary, 23d December 1696, for trial, upon a charge for breach of an Act of Parliament “against the crime of Blasphemy.”

Aikenhead, finding what his impenitence threatened, presented a Petition and Retraction, in which he professed great abhorrence of the expressions attributed to him. Upon trial, nevertheless, the jury found him guilty, and he was adjudged to be hanged on the 8th of January following, his body to be interred at the foot of the gallows.

In the Collection of State Trials by T. B. Howell, vol. xiii. 1812, will be found a full report of the Proceedings, extracted from the Records of Justiciary at Edinburgh, accompanied with various papers copied from manuscripts which had belonged to John Locke. The case had previously been reported in Maclaurin’s “*Criminal Cases*,” p. 12, Edinburgh, 1774; and in Hugo Arnot’s “*Celebrated Criminal*

Trials," p. 322, Edinburgh, 1785. A special reference to the Locke Papers occurs in the Correspondence of Francis Horner, M.P., vol. i. pp. 288 and 487, London, 1843.

Lord Macaulay (History of England, vol. iv. p. 781, 1855,) revived public sympathy by his statement of "the case of Thomas Aikenhead," who, although he styles him a student of 18 years of age, speaks rather absurdly of him as "the poor boy," in order to accuse Sir James Stewart, the Lord Advocate, and Sir Patrick Hume, Lord Polwarth, then Lord Chancellor of Scotland, "who thus had it in his power to do the worst action of his bad life;" while at the same time he makes no scruple to assert, that "the Preachers," that is, the Presbyterian ministers of Edinburgh, were "the boy's murderers." Lord Macaulay's statement was controverted in the "Witness" newspaper, and this article was reprinted as a separate pamphlet by the author, Professor, the late Rev. Dr M'Crie, entitled "Macaulay on Scotland: a Critique." Edinburgh, 1856. These articles in the "Witness" and other papers led to the publication of a pamphlet, in reply, by the minister of the Unitarian Chapel, Edinburgh, with the title, "Thomas Aikenhead: A Historical Review, in relation to Mr Macaulay and the Witness. By John Gordon," London. 1856, 8vo, pp. 31; and a Supplement, no date, pp. 16. The object of most of these writers is to illustrate the persecuting spirit and bigotry of the Scottish Presbyterians after they had recovered their power at the Revolution.

At Aikenhead's trial the chief witness was a fellow-student, who, in his ill-advised zeal, had printed a poetical tract with this title,—

"A SATYR against Atheistical-Deism, with the Genuine Character of a Deist. To which is Prefixt, An account of Mr Aikinhead's Notions, who is now in Prison for the same Damnable Apostacy. By Mungo Craig, S.Ph. & Sac.Th. Edinburgh, printed for Robert Hutchison, and sold at his shop in the head of the Colledge-Wind, M.DC.XCVI." 4to, pp. 16. We find his name in a Latinised form, "Quintigernus Craig," in the List of Students who took the degree of Master of Arts in the University of Edinburgh, June 11th 1696. In Aikenhead's last speech, which he left in a written form, he thus refers to the above pamphlet when he says — "And I cannot, without doing myself a manifest injury, but vindicat my innocence from those abominable aspersions in a printed Satyr of Mr Mungo Craig's, who

was an evidence against me; whom I leave to reckon with God and his own conscience, if he was not as deeply concerned in those hellish notions (for which I am sentenced) as ever I was; however, I bless the Lord, I forgive him and all men, and wishes the Lord may forgive him likewise. To conclude, as the Lord in his providence hath been pleased in this exemplary manner to punish my great sins, so it is my earnest desire to him, that my blood may give a stop to that rageing spirit of Atheism which hath taken such footing in Brittain, both in practice and profession."

The printed Satyr by Craig is sufficiently scarce. I have also another tract, of which I have seen no other copy, issued by Craig as a Vindication of himself. It has this title:—

"A Lye is no Scandal: Or a Vindication of Mr Mungo Craig, from a Ridiculous Calumny cast upon him by T. A. who was Executed for Apostacy, at Edinburgh, the 8 of January, 1697. Written, January 15, MDCXCVII."

12mo. pp. 16.

(Signed)

MUNGO CRAIG.¹

January the 16, 1697.

We cannot but feel regret that Aikenhead's petitions for mercy had not been granted, as the various accounts seem to prove that he expressed great penitence, so that he not only might have abjured his false notions, but eventually proved a useful minister of the gospel.

II. THE RENFREWSHIRE WITCHES.

This case, described more minutely in the above letter, is well known, and at the time passed under the name of "*The Devil's Doings at Bargarran.*" It refers to a girl of eleven years of age, Christian, daughter of John Shaw of Bargarran, in Renfrewshire, on the south bank of the Clyde. Seven persons implicated as her tormentors were apprehended in December 1696, and brought before an Assize at Paisley, the result of which was that five women were condemned, and brought to the Gallow Green of Paisley, June 10, 1697, where a gibbet and a fire were prepared

¹ Craig's over-zeal may have failed in his object, and have had a direct influence on his own future life. His name at least does not occur, as a Parish minister, in the Rev Dr Hew Scott's great work, "*Fasti Ecclesiæ Scoticanæ.*" It is possible, however, that Craig may have cast his lot among the Presbyterian settlers in the North of Ireland.

at the same time. These five having been brought out, and hung for a few minutes on the one, were then cut down and burned on the other. A man, who would have become a sixth victim, was found that morning dead in his cell, and was supposed to have been strangled by the Devil. "And so ended (says Dr Robert Chambers) the tragedy of Bargarran's daughter."

This, I think, was about the last scene of the kind that occurred in Scotland, with exception of another poor deluded creature, Betty Laing, at Pittenweem, in Fife, eight years later.